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## Historical Restorations

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## HISTORICAL RESTORATIONS

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PRESERVATION of the historic monuments of the nation has long been recognized as a work of vital necessity. In the words of Joseph Howe, "A wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its monuments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs its great public structures and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual reference to the sacrifices and glories of the past."<sup>1</sup> It is unfortunate, however, that many structures of the past that would be highly prized today have partially, or even wholly, disappeared. For these, apart from the mere preservation of such ruins as still exist, there is the alternative possibility of an historical restoration. Previous to the outbreak of the last war, Canada, and the Province of Ontario in particular, had become what might be called "restoration conscious."

The policy of rebuilding important historical structures, instead of simply preserving the existing remains, was already manifest on a considerable scale in the United States before making an appearance in Canada. Well known are the reconstructions of such famous sites as Williamsburg, the old colonial capital of Virginia, Fort Ticonderoga at the foot of Lake Champlain, and Old Fort Niagara, at the mouth of the Niagara River in the state of New York. The latter project held a special interest for Canadians and it is fitting that many of our countrymen were closely associated with the work of reconstruction. First French, 1678-1759, then British, 1759-96, and since then, American, the flags of all three countries had in turn floated from its ramparts and its story covers many important pages in the history not only of the Niagara frontier, but of the nations of France, Britain, the United States, and Canada. Old Fort Niagara was, from the completion of its restoration, extraordinarily successful in attracting tourists and this initial step towards the re-fortification of our so-called "undefended frontier" soon brought a demand for "reprisals" in this country.

By 1936, officials interested in the development of Ontario's tourist trade—already in the class of a major industry—had discovered hitherto unsuspected possibilities in the almost forgotten ruins of many historic sites within this province. The coincidence of a policy of government-sponsored projects for the relief of unemployment during the depression and the new interest in historic sites as an aid to the tourist trade resulted in the Ontario government taking active measures, between 1936 and 1940, for the restoration of Fort Henry at Kingston, Fort George and Navy Hall at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Old Fort Erie on the Canadian shore of the Niagara across from Buffalo, and non-military sites such as the homes of William Lyon Mackenzie at Queenston and Joseph Brant at Burlington.

<sup>1</sup>J. A. Chisholm (ed.), *Speeches and Public Letters of Joseph Howe* (Halifax, 1909), II, 619-20.

In addition to Fort Henry, many of you have no doubt visited the restorations at Niagara and Burlington. As professional historians, most of you will have discovered in them some inaccuracies in detail; but I trust that, generally speaking, you have been more pleased than disappointed. I am, myself, aware of some unavoidable imperfections, the majority of which do not present themselves during a casual inspection. On the whole, I believe, perhaps not unnaturally, in view of my association with all of these undertakings, that the work has been successful to a high degree, possibly exceeding much that has been accomplished elsewhere along similar lines.

Whether or not you agree with this statement depends partly upon your interpretation of what is meant by a successful restoration. It is obvious that there are a number of standards by which the accomplishment may be assessed. Many persons will think of success only from the standpoint of the tourist attraction, but any example of the unusual, any monstrosity, will attract the curious, as Barnum and Bailey discovered long ago. The creation of employment during the great depression, with jobs for labour, skilled artisans, contractors, architects, and even one poor research historian, was undoubtedly a worthy enterprise and quite successful as far as this minority was concerned, but this is scarcely justification for the expenditure of large amounts of public money upon historical restorations in preference to other projects. From the historian's standpoint, however, let me suggest that the criterion of success really lies in the answer to this question. Can historical restorations assist not so much the advanced student, but the general public, in the appreciation of history?

It may interest you, as professional historians, to know something of the procedures followed in our reconstructions, of the problems encountered, of the imperfections that were unavoidable, and of the annoyances that were incidental throughout the course of the typical restoration. Obviously, the initial phase in the conduct of any historical restoration is the necessary research. Special problems are involved. The average author can get by with casual references to historic sites and buildings, leaving a great deal to his individual reader's imagination. For example, we are told that Brock, after his death at Queenston Heights, was first buried in the "cavalier bastion" at Fort George. It is extremely doubtful whether Lady Edgar, or, for that matter, any of Brock's other biographers, had a clear conception of what is meant by a "cavalier bastion." Yet, for the actual reconstruction of Fort George, it was imperative to uncover every detail in connection with the bastion referred to. What was its tracing? Was it a full or hollow bastion? Were there revetments? What was the cross-section of its ditch with the escarp, counterscarp, and glacis? Had it a berm, with fraising, and, if so, how wide? And again, what was the profile of the parapet with banquette, interior, superior, and exterior slopes? Indeed, merely to interpret the original plans, it was necessary to make a comprehensive study of the whole science of fortification as it stood at the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Broadly speaking, I believe that the cardinal rule for historical restorations should be "when in doubt about something, leave it out." Unfortunately, some features about which one may be dubious, such as the structure of a roof or foundation of a building, are impossible of omission. That is one way in which imperfections tend to creep in. I have often thought that the historian conducting research has a parallel in the astronomer studying the skies with his telescope. In the case of the moon, the astronomer can discern mountain ranges, valleys, and craters, but no matter how powerful the lens or how great the amount of time spent in observation his knowledge is definitely limited by the physical imperfections of the instruments at his disposal. The material with which a research student must work is likewise imperfect, limited to the records that have survived and can be discovered, either by archaeological investigations on the site, or by digging amongst manuscripts and plans in the depths of archives or libraries.

Manuscript sources are variable, depending upon the past importance of the site being restored and upon the fortune, good or bad, which influenced their survival. The great significance of Fort Henry as the Citadel of Upper Canada, together with its continuous use as a military post for almost eight decades, made the task of research less onerous than in the case of the Niagara forts, which were neglected and almost forgotten soon after the War of 1812. While knowledge gained through archaeological investigation is most often incomplete, it is certain as far as it goes and it serves to confirm or disprove the evidence of plans and manuscripts. Plans of buildings are invariably prepared before the structures themselves are erected, and in the absence of post-construction drawings of a later date, there is naturally some doubt as to whether actual construction followed the original plans in all details. For example, in the case of Fort George, some important plans are inscribed "*Works Proposed to be Constructed on the High Ground behind Navy Hall during the Year 1796.*" Yet, through archaeological investigation, it was possible to verify the actual construction of those works. An additional field of research might seem to lie in local tradition and the recollections of the oldest inhabitants of the area concerned. It has been my personal experience that this source of information is almost completely unreliable.

In every restoration with which I have been associated, the initial objective of research has been the preparation of a comprehensive report, designed to be of practical assistance to the authorities concerned in the solution of basic problems. Let me cite an example. Perhaps the most important decision connected with the restoration of Fort George was choice of the period in its history to be represented by the reconstruction. The first fort had opposed the Americans in the War of 1812. There, General Brock, the hero of Upper Canada, had his headquarters, and there he was buried after his death in the battle of Queenston Heights. The second Fort George, constructed by the Americans and afterwards garrisoned by the British for only a short time, was never actually attacked and had few historical associations for Canadians. For these reasons, it was decided that Fort George might best be restored to its

original state, as built by the orders of Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe between 1796 and 1799.

When the report was completed and basic decisions were made, my association with a typical restoration entered upon a new phase. In the preparation of working drawings, I was an associate of the architect and my practical knowledge of draughtmanship was not amiss. Later, when contracts were let and the construction commenced, I found myself functioning as an "historical supervisor," with everlasting problems.

A successful restoration could only result from the close co-operation of the government, the architect, the contractor, and the historian, but specialized training had given to each of these a particular viewpoint. Government officials, responsible to the electorate of this province, were interested in securing permanent assets in return for the expenditure of Crown funds. While the architect was indispensable in the preparation of working plans and in the effective supervision of contracts, he had, perforce, to restrain his creative instincts and content himself with the role of mere copyist for in historical restorations there is little scope for improvements beyond the ken of the original builders. On the other hand, modern contractors, specialists in efficient production, struggled to comprehend the necessity of cruder and more laborious methods of construction, solely for the attainment of authentic effects. The historian, for his part, is inclined to be both oblivious to costs and adamant in his insistence on authenticity, even in minor things completely concealed from the public eye. When serious but inevitable differences of opinion arose, compromise was the only practical expedient.

At the time Fort George was originally constructed, boards were sawn from logs by hand and bore the distinctive parallel markings of the whip-saw, in unmistakable contrast to the modern product scored with the curved lines of the circular power-saw. At modern costs, the expense of producing entirely by hand the enormous quantities of boards required for the reconstruction was entirely prohibitive. Our practical compromise was to cut all visible boards by hand, utilizing a saw-pit especially constructed for the purpose. Concealed construction, such as the sills and joists of lower floors, was produced by modern methods. Again, the pressure application of creosote as a wood preservative is an essentially modern practice, but, since its use promised permanence to timber stockades and revetments, the departure from authenticity seemed more than justified.

Every construction project, large or small, would seem to have its self-appointed critics. Removal of a tree, approximately 75 years of age, to facilitate the restoration of a bastion dating back more than 150 years, led to public accusations of vandalism. The second Fort George had been superimposed upon the original British fort and the outlines of the former were readily traceable at the commencement of our work. As the remains of the American fort disappeared and the shape of the reconstructed British fort emerged, local antiquarians became most eloquent in questioning the authenticity of the reconstruction. Efforts to convince them of the accuracy of any evidence antedating the recollections of the

oldest living inhabitants resulted only in frustration. Even here at Kingston, to this very day, there are residents who firmly believe that Fort Henry was built the wrong way around, documentary evidence to the contrary.

While factors beyond his control may compel the historian to accept some compromises, I am convinced that he may rest happy if the general effect, the atmosphere, or the illusion—call it what we will—of authenticity has been created. If, in spite of the shortcomings and imperfections, of which he alone may be aware, there is a convincing over-all effect, one may experience that satisfaction the ancient armourer must have had when the sword of his manufacture rang true. It is a clear case of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts thereof. The objective has been achieved if the reconstructed site inspires in the beholder a sense of the past, a feeling impossible of analysis but very real nevertheless, and never so strong for me as when viewing Fort Henry by moonlight, with the lanterns burning by the drawbridge.

When the task of restoration had been accomplished, the problems of exhibition and management were added to my work of historical supervision. Although Fort Henry today has the appearance of an impressive fortress, bristling with mounted cannon and defended by glacis, ditch, drawbridge, caponnière, reverse fires, flanking towers, and all the paraphernalia of early nineteenth-century fortification, it is really a museum piece. A restored structure with empty, untenanted rooms would have less interest for the average visitor than if its interior space were utilized for the exhibition of historical objects. In the case of Fort Henry and the Niagara forts, certain rooms were refurnished as they might have been when occupied by British soldiers of more than a century ago. Because pursuit of this policy beyond a certain point leads to needless duplication and a monotonous effect, it was decided to use surplus space for the display of appropriate museum pieces. It is almost an axiom that the small museum must specialize, and here at Fort Henry we have concentrated upon separate collections of infantry, cavalry, artillery, and naval arms and equipment. Much of the material in the naval museum is especially interesting, having been salvaged from the wrecks of the war vessels of 1812 which lie sunk in Dead Man's and Navy Bays. The museum at Fort Erie includes a unique collection of buttons, regimental badges, and buckles, and even the leather of shoes that the soldiers wore, all excavated from the ruins during the restoration. Among grim mementoes of the siege are bayonets bent in fantastic shapes by the explosion of the north-east bastion. To explain to visitors the story of the heroic siege, a large-scale model illustrates the British and American fortifications. In addition there has been assembled martial equipment of the period and a superb collection of military prints.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the rehabilitation of the historic structure and its use as a repository for suitable museum material, it is my conviction that an effi-

<sup>2</sup>In the establishment of museums, local organizations can render valuable assistance and Fort Henry owes much to the Kingston Historical Society and the untiring efforts of its President, Lieutenant Colonel C. M. Strange.

cient guide service is essential if the full significance of the restored site is to be conveyed to the general public. There is nothing singular in the mere provision of a guide service; but at Fort Henry there has been initiated a procedure which is perhaps unique. To enhance the atmosphere of the past, our guides are carefully trained and uniformed as Imperial troops of a century ago. Known as the "Fort Henry Guard," they are, ostensibly, a part of another age, in keeping with the limestone walls, the drawbridge, and the formidable cannon. The personnel of the Guard are, for the most part, university students, many of them being veterans of World War II. Indeed, the service ribbons of that conflict are the only anachronism in their equipment! Notable occasions, such as the visit of the Canadian Historical Association, are observed by the Guard with exhibitions of foot and arms drill, including the traditional *feu de joie* and the firing of salutes with the Fort's century-and-a-half old muzzle-loading cannon, employing the drill and equipment laid down in the text-books of the period. It may be argued that all this involves unnecessary expense, but I firmly believe that the Guard is the spirit of Fort Henry and is the greatest single factor in creating an illusion, an illusion of the past restored to life.

From the historian's standpoint, the justification of the government's work in rehabilitating such important structures as Fort George, Fort Erie, and Fort Henry, instead of merely preserving the unintelligible ruins, is that these restorations constitute a significant contribution to the teaching of Canadian history and to its general appreciation. When it is possible to associate the story of some past event with the actual location where it occurred, when the story of a battle can be related upon the actual ground where it was fought, the topographical surroundings, surviving trenches, or other remains are all a stimulus to the feeling of reality. This stimulus is even greater when, by crossing the antique drawbridge of a fort, the visitor finds himself, to all appearances, among the authentic surroundings of another age. The effort of imagination required to secure a sense of the past is thus reduced to a minimum that is within the capacity of every normal person. It is a visual teaching of history. The true value and justification of the Ontario government's policy with respect to historical restorations is that these constitute a very real aid in transmitting to many thousands of persons a true sense of history, which is, in reality, as much a feeling or state of mind as it is the scientific accumulation of facts. If we concede that preservation of historical tradition is the very basis of nationality, it is to the lasting credit of the government of this province that, through a programme of historical restorations, it is contributing in no small measure to the development of patriotism and of the highest qualities of Canadian citizenship.